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SUBJECT: HOW TO TALK TO TURKS: THREE PROTOTYPICAL INTERLOCUTORS

REF: ANKARA 5496

Classified by CDA Nancy E. McEldowney; reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (C) Summary: Our Turkish interlocutors can roughly be divided into three groups: elites; players; and "real Turks". USG officials generally find themselves speaking with elites (western-oriented decision makers or aspiring decision makers), who appear to share their views in order to be polite and avoid conflict. Players (people with influence but not decision makers) tend to deliver long monologues to "win" the conversation, but if we listen and ask questions, the result can be an informative exchange. Real Turks (the proverbial man-on-the-street) respond to a compassionate, humanistic approach -- Emboffs have made a real impact by meeting with family members of Turks killed by terrorists, supporting Turkish charities, and simply visiting people in rural Anatolia. End Summary.

ELITES, PLAYERS, AND "REAL TURKS"

2. (C) Over the years, we have noticed three generic types of Turkish interlocutors. The first, elites, are skilled at talking to Westerners. They often speak excellent English, have lived or studied abroad, and have extensive experience working and communicating with foreigners. Many Turkish elites -- including MFA officials, senior military officers, and senior executives in large business conglomerates -- fall into this category. In conversations with foreigners, they bend over backwards to be polite and agreeable, and fashion themselves and Turkey as part of the West. They emphasize the importance of Turkey's secular democratic tradition and long-running alliance with the U.S. and other NATO countries. They view themselves as the Atatürkist face of Turkey -- a face that is gradually becoming a faade as democratization progresses and "real Turks," concerns in particular start to take center stage.

3. (C) The second type we refer to as the players. Many members of Parliament, most journalists, many working-level bureaucrats, and regional political party officials fall into this category. Many have influence, although they are not decision makers. Whatever their political party affiliation, these individuals tend to subscribe to hard-line nationalistic views on a variety of foreign policy issues. Players see political conversations with foreigners as a game in which their goal is to score points. Players win the game by bombarding the listener with accusations, dominating the conversation, or eliciting emotional responses. They are not initially interested in a serious exchange of ideas, do not appear to listen well, and are prone to endless monologues. Players can sometimes be rude. They will vigorously defend Turkey, while attack the U.S. and the EU. They are ideological thinkers, passionately attached to pre-set conclusions. Players often lack the ability to distinguish between competing explanations for political events, and are susceptible to a wide variety of conspiracy theories. They provide a window into the mindset of mid-level bureaucrats who are the cogs that make the government wheels turn and allow the elites to continue to function.

4. (C) The third type is "real Turks". Real Turks are the backbone of Turkey. They are taxi drivers, small businessmen, farmers, teachers, blue collar workers, policemen on the beat, and service industry workers. For the most part, these individuals have limited contact with foreigners, speak little or no English, and derive most of their information from television. Although real Turks are often patriotic, they also often feel alienated from the Turkish elite, especially the traditional political class (as opposed the current AKP government) whom they generally distrust and view as incompetent and corrupt. Economic issues, especially unemployment, and their families, welfare are their primary concerns. The PKK threat, moreover, directly affects real Turks because they are the primary victims of PKK terrorism. The battalions of Turkish soldiers serving in the southeast are largely conscripts drawn from families without the power or influence of elites or players.

Middle and lower-class families fear the loss of their young men fulfilling their compulsory military service. Their concerns feed the conspiracy theories of the players and create inconvenient realities for the elites.

LET'S TALK TURKEY: TACTICAL INSIGHTS

15. (C) It appears easy to talk to Turkish elites. They sound reasonable and accommodating, and may ignore or only tangentially and politely address sensitive issues in U.S.-Turkish bilateral relations -- an attitude that, while comforting, may be misleading. Elites may give U.S. and EU interlocutors the impression that everyone is on the same page, but in reality their goal is simply to have a "successful" (i.e., not confrontational or embarrassing) meeting. Because the emphasis is upon cordiality, politeness and appearing moderate, elites will often try to make their points with subtle cues. They often incorrectly conclude that their American or EU counterparts are doing the same. Although many elites know that Americans tend to bring up the most important issues first, elites save their most important concerns until their interlocutor is preparing to leave.

16. (C) Players are the exact opposite. Meetings with them may appear difficult, but are actually easier. If one remains calm, doesn't show emotion, and keeps asking questions, it is possible to get a clear view of their attitudes. Conversations with players, moreover, can result in a firm handle on the sensationalistic, conspiracy-laden political views of many Turks.

17. (C) Real Turks are rank conscience and suspicious of foreigners. They will almost always be cordial, helpful, and hospitable with guests, foreigners, and higher ranking individuals. It is often hard, however, to unearth their real views. Like elites, they may often agree in an effort to be polite and avoid confrontation. The best way to connect with real Turks and get them to open up is to show them respect, compassion, and human empathy -- three things they do not often receive from their own elites and bureaucrats. Emboffs have garnered huge dividends by meeting with family members of Turkish police killed by terrorists, by supporting Turkish charities, and by simply approaching Turks in a compassionate, non-arrogant, and humanistic manner. A visit by a U.S. diplomat to a rural school, office, or family home makes a powerful impression on Turks, who are well aware that most Turkish diplomats, and other elites, have never visited rural Anatolia. Real Turks are also most interested in concrete and tangible benefits. They often ask Emboffs about the possibility of increased U.S. investment in their hometowns (i.e., jobs) and U.S. military action against the PKK in Iraq (i.e., security for the sons serving in the southeast.)

Comment

18. (C) These three groups are products of Turkey's flawed, but evolving, democracy. The better we listen, the more we will learn.
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